

Sri Lankan government hands greater powers to Chief of Defence Staff

Sarath Kumara
17 June 2009

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake presented a Bill to parliament on June 9 to create a new Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) post with substantial powers. Just three weeks after proclaiming victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), this is another move to strengthen the military's role, and consolidate the politico-military cabal that now surrounds President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The Bill is certain to be passed with the approval of not just the ruling alliance but also the main opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Both parties supported the war and joined the government in venerating the military after the LTTE's final defeat and the detention of nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians.

The existing office of CDS was created under Emergency Regulations in June 1999, with limited powers to implement directions issued by the Sri Lankan president and the National Security Council (NSC) and to advise the NSC on the preparedness of the armed forces. The chiefs of the three armed forces—army, navy and air force—have considerable autonomy to carry out their plans.

By contrast, the new CDS will direct a unified command centre and exert far tighter control over the three service commanders. The president, who remains the commander in chief of the armed forces, will appoint the CDS from among serving commanders of the army, navy and air force. The CDS will “function under the direction, supervision and control” of the Secretary of the Defence Ministry, who is currently President Rajapakse's brother, Gotabhaya.

According to the Bill, the CDS's functions include to “provide strategic directions of armed forces”, “develop a doctrine for the joint employment of the armed forces” and “facilitate the preparation of strategic plans”. The CDS will

also “co-ordinate matters in respect of functions relating to intelligence,” as well as prepare operational and contingency plans and advice on military recruitment and procurement tenders.

The CDS will chair the Committee of the Chief of Defence Staff, comprised of the three armed forces commanders, and take charge of relations between the armed forces and defence ministry. While the CDS's term of the office is two years, the president can extend an appointment for another two years and “in a time of emergency,” for any number of terms of office.

The present CDS is Air Chief Marshal Donald Perera but the Colombo media has speculated that Army Commander General Sarath Fonseka will be appointed once the Bill is approved by parliament. General Fonseka has emerged as the most powerful and ruthless general, particularly during the past three years of war, during which he had made repeated statements threatening critics of the war.

Last December, the official government news website posted an interview with Fonseka under the headline, “Lt. General Sarath Fonseka—Man of the Moment”, in which he called into question civilian control of the military. “I think, like in other countries, national security should not change, even if governments change,” he stated. “The President has to be a patriot. We have to live with pride and honour and this need has to be recognised by whoever is in power.” He concluded: “Presidents and politicians, they come and go. But citizens remain. They need security.”

Soon after winning the war, as part of the government's prolonged military celebrations, President Rajapakse promoted the three forces commanders to full four-star rankings, the first time that serving officers had been promoted to that level. Fonseka was promoted to General, Navy Chief Wasantha Karannagoda to Admiral, and Air Force Chief Roshan Goonathilake to Air Chief Marshal.

The government's consolidation and concentration of the military's powers in the hands of the CDS is part of a new stage in the militarisation of the country. In 1983, the Sri Lankan ruling elite plunged the country into war after decades of official discrimination against the country's Tamil minority. Anti-Tamil chauvinism has been the main weapon used by successive governments to divide the working class along ethnic lines and entrench the rule of the Sinhala elite.

As the war continued, the military assumed an increasingly prominent role in political life. Between 1982 and 1986, the three armed forces grew from 15,000 to 36,000. Since the Rajapakse government resumed the war in 2006, the combined size of the three forces has increased to more than 300,000. In 1978, defence expenditure was 1.5 percent of GDP or \$US40 million. By 1985, the GDP share increased to 3.5 percent or \$215 million. In 2008, it rose to 4.5 percent or nearly \$1.7 billion.

Defence Secretary Rajapakse and the armed forces commanders have praised President Rajapakse for providing everything they requested during the war and for giving them a free hand to carry out their military plans. The ruthlessness of the operation was shown in the last days of the war. The UN estimated that 7,000 civilians were killed from January 20 to May 7, while tens of thousands were injured. Nearly 300,000 Tamil people forced to flee the war zone were herded into detention camps set up by the military without any constitutional or legal authority.

The Rajapakse government's support for the military has long included covering up its war crimes and abuses of legal and democratic rights. Over the years the military has cultivated paramilitary groups and death squads that have been unleashed against politicians, journalists and anyone opposed to the government or military.

Following the defeat of the LTTE, the military is preparing for a permanent occupation of the island's north and east where most Tamils lived. The army has planned two headquarters in the Vanni, at the former LTTE bases of Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu. Fonseka told the *Nation*, a Colombo-based weekly: "Personnel attached to them will be doing day-to-day security work. For operational deployment, more such units will be needed. The Army Commander's units will have to serve as reserve attack units."

Far from the military's size and scope of operations being reduced in the wake of the victory over the LTTE, they are

being boosted. Fonseka has previously told the media that the number of army soldiers will be increased from 200,000 to 300,000 and the army will be modernised. New army and air force recruitment campaigns have already commenced.

The military's further expansion is not simply a matter of suppressing Tamil resistance to Colombo's rule. In the name of "nation building," the government is preparing to impose the economic burdens of the war and deepening global crisis onto working people. The labour minister has admitted that in the garment sector alone 100,000 workers lost their jobs during the 12 months to March. The build-up of the security forces is aimed at suppressing any popular resistance to the government new "economic war".

The military has a brutal record in suppressing opposition against successive governments. Several workers were killed in August 1953, when a hartal or nationwide shutdown of factories and businesses brought the government to its knees. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party-led government in 1971 and the UNP government in 1989-1990 respectively killed about 20,000 and 60,000 Sinhalese youth to crush a rural insurgency in the south of the island. During the 26-year war against the Tamil masses, an estimated 100,000 people were killed.

Unable to resolve the grievances of the Tamil minority or the working masses, the capitalist elite is increasingly relying on the armed forces to defend its rule. The military in turn has asserted greater power for itself and has become a major factor in the ruling establishment. Under the Rajapakse government these processes have taken a leap. The decision to consolidate the military leadership as well as to expand recruitment is a sharp warning to all working people of the measures being prepared to deal with any opposition to the government and its policies.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact